

Op-ed

Disaster Movies Are Us

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Where does our national infatuation with disaster movies come from? Was “Towering Inferno” starring Steve McQueen or “Black Sunday” the first of their kind or just the ones that I can recall? But since these “ground breaking” films there seems to be a constant stream of death and mayhem caused by earthquakes, tsunamis (tidal waves for folks who just moved here from the Midwest), tornados, hurricanes, volcanoes, asteroids, fires, floods, dam breaks, insect infestations, pandemic diseases that kill instantly, climate changes, ... did I leave anything out? Ah yes, alien invasions!

Even though my everyday business is trying to motivate people and organizations to do something to become better prepared for when disasters do strike, I have to admit I love to watch a good disaster movie.

My all time favorite disaster movie is “Volcano” starring an Emergency Management Director (Tommy Lee Jones). He is dealing with a volcano forming in the middle of Los Angeles. I went to see that particular film in the theater. My wife kept poking me telling me to stop laughing (since it wasn’t a humorous part of the movie), like when all these Fire Chiefs did what the emergency manager told them to do!

The next made for TV movie in the disaster genre is coming soon to a TV near you. “10.5” is an NBC TV production about a series of earthquakes that strike along the Western United States coast. Yes, there is even an image in the movie of the Space Needle falling over like some big fir tree being cut down, landing with a ka-boom! Then I’ve seen trailers for a climate change movie “The Day After Tomorrow” that has a huge ocean wave inundating the East Coast, followed by New York City turning into a frozen wasteland looking like something out of the ice age.

Disaster movies have even started their own “disaster mythology.” Public panic is one of them. What good disaster movie wouldn’t have hoards of people running crazy through their neighborhoods, crashing their cars into trees and power poles (power poles especially, they spark and make fires). Then there is the inevitable looting that follows. The reality is that studies have shown that people do not panic unless they feel trapped and unable to get away. And, looting is almost non-existent. Crime actually goes down in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

I've got some bad news for some of your fatalists out there who tell me that there is nothing you can do to become prepared. "We're all going to die." The truth of the matter is that only about 2% of a population actually dies in major calamities.

So, there is a 98% chance that you are probably not going to die, and your level of comfort after a disaster will depend on what you do today to become better prepared for any disaster. I recommend that you have a disaster supplies kit that contains a minimum of three days of supplies for your family and your pets.

We do know that hospitals and other medical treatment facilities can be overwhelmed during disasters. One of the best things you can do is to personally learn CPR and get some first aid training from the American Red Cross. Then go out and buy a well-stocked first aid kit.

A very common question I get all the time is "Where is the closest disaster shelter to me?" My answer, "You're living in it—your home." Your house or apartment will be more than likely your disaster shelter. So prepare it as such. Make it safe for you and your family.

The reality part is that more than likely you will experience another major disaster or two in your lifetime. That fact I can accurately predict. After all, we've had 19 Presidentially Declared disasters here in King County in the last 40 years.

So, will I continue to go to watch disaster movies? You bet! Just keep in mind like I do, that most of what we see is not science, but fiction, and is meant to be entertainment and has little to do with reality.

Speaking of fiction and reality. After watching "Finding Nemo" with my three-year-old grandson, I came to realize that it really is a "disaster movie." We like to teach them young—don't we?